

although a case could be made that it heightens the moral atmosphere of the work.

⁶Compare, for example, another Stratemeyer production, *Tom Swift and His Television Detector*, a work in a series largely about exploiting technology for the ends of justice. Where the boys' series educates, the girls' series evades.

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Romancing the Plot: The Real Beast of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*

by June Cummins

When Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* was released late in 1991, critics hailed the film for its apparently innovative portrayal of the heroine, Belle.¹ In *Newsweek*, David Ansen claimed that "from the start, the filmmakers knew they didn't want Belle to be the passive character of the original story or a carbon copy of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, a creation some critics found cloyingly sexist" (75). In *MacLean's*, Brian Johnson praised Disney for "break[ing] the sexist mould of its fairy-tale heroines. . . . *Beauty and the Beast* spells out its enlightenment in no uncertain terms" (56). And in *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin asserted that Belle is "a smart, independent heroine . . . who makes a conspicuously better role model than the marriage-minded Disney heroines of the past" (1). But in spite of this insistence that Belle is a strong female character, that this fairy tale is "different," I saw the same old story, a romance plot that robs female characters of self-determination and individuality. Not at all a feminist movie, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* slips easily into the mold of almost all other popular versions of fairy tales; that is, it encourages young viewers to believe that true happiness for women exists only in the arms of a prince and that

their most important quest is finding that prince.

Although it is clear that "Beauty and the Beast" has always been in part a love story, earlier printed versions of the tale offer valuable lessons in addition to emphasizing the love relationship. Disney, on the other hand, strips the traditional fairy tale of anything but the romantic trajectory, throws in a dose of violence, and woos its vast audience into believing it has been educated as well as entertained. Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, while initially presenting a more interesting and better developed heroine than those we find in other Disney animated features, undermines the gains it makes by focusing narrative attention on courtship as plot advancement and marriage as dénouement. Certainly, romantic love is an important part of people's lives. But if we want children to develop balanced views of relationships between men and women and of their own identities as active individuals with full access to society, we should question the messages sent by such films.

The deleterious effects of concluding fairy tales with marriage have been extensively examined by such critics as Marcia K. Lieberman and Karen Rowe. Lieberman points out that while

such stories end with marriage, the action of the story is concerned with courtship,

which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's life, brief though courtship is, because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself. After marriage she ceases to be wooed, her consent is no longer sought, she derives her status from her husband, and her personal identity is thus snuffed out. When fairy tales show courtship as exciting, and conclude with marriage, and the vague statement that "they lived happily ever after," children may develop a deep-seated desire always to be courted, since marriage is literally the end of the story. (199-200)

Rowe argues that the marriages at the ends of these tales are more accessible to and thus more influential on the female reader/viewer than any other aspect of the stories:

Because it is a major social institution, marriage functions not merely as a comic ending, but also as a bridge between the worlds of fantasy and reality. Whereas "once upon a time" draws the reader into a timeless fantasy realm . . . the wedding ceremony catapults her back into contemporary reality. Precisely this close association of romantic fiction with the actuality of marriage as a social institution proves the most influential factor in shaping female expectations. (221)

Undeniably, *Beauty and the Beast* is this kind of fairy tale.

Indeed, virtually all recent Disney animated fairy tales, including *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*, privilege the romance plot structure.² While one may argue that Disney is not responsible for this tendency because fairy tales have always relied on the romance plot, it is possible to see that in fact Disney magnifies the romantic element of its versions of the tales. Writing about earlier Disney features, Kay Stone argues that with "subtle shifts in plot and character, Disney focuses attention on the *romantic* aspects of fairy tales. What he believes in, then, is the secular myth of the modern age, the love story" (43). Stone points to a Disney planning session during which it was decided that the film version of *Snow White* would emphasize the "romantic angle" (44). Finding the same tendency in *The Little Mermaid*, A. Waller Hastings concludes, "The Disney version accentuates the most sentimental and romantic aspects of the story at the expense of its moral and psychological complexity" (85).

This choice of emphasis has persisted for *Beauty and the Beast*. The differences between the version that Disney created, now becoming canonical, and the version that comes closest to being definitive, that written by Madame Le Prince de Beaumont, may seem insignificant but in fact are dramatic. Clearly, no fairy tale is "fixed" in terms of having one established and authoritative version. Betsy Hearne, who has written a comprehensive survey of the many variations of "Beauty and the Beast," declares at the outset of her book that "the story has not petrified as a relic of the past but has adapted constantly to reflect new

variations of culture and creativity" (1). But Hearne concludes, after having researched the history of "Beauty and the Beast," that the tale has "enduring elements" and that "the core elements remain because they are magnetic to each other, structurally, and to people, variably but almost universally" (6). Because Beaumont's eighteenth-century version is considered definitive, Hearne summarizes it in her first chapter and includes a facsimile of it in an appendix. Keeping in mind that Disney's version has overtaken Beaumont's, at least in our children's view, we can see how Disney highlights the "romantic angle" of the tale, most notably by changing the essential characters of Belle, her father, and the Beast and by altering the basic plot.

Beaumont's *Beauty* was considered a new kind of heroine, a marked departure from the protagonists of earlier fairy tales. Instead of being nobles, *Beauty* and her family belong to the merchant class. Their wealth has been gained by the father's hard work. He uses his money to educate his children, sons and daughters alike, a fact that is mentioned even before *Beauty* is introduced. Through commerce and education, the father perpetuates meritocratic rather than aristocratic advancement, and *Beauty* is the symbol of that meritocracy. In fact, Beaumont wrote "Beauty and the Beast" specifically to reinforce the goals of the meritocracy for the young women who were the intended audience of her story. Embedding the fairy tale in a frame narrative that presents several young women who have come to hear her tales, Beaumont clearly intends to provide moral and intellectual guidance for her listeners. Although she encourages these girls to be virtuous and "agreeable," she just as ardently wants them to be intelligent and well-instructed: "Their several faults are pointed out, and the easy way to mend them, as well as to think, and speak, and act properly; no less care being taken to form their hearts to goodness, than to enlighten their understandings with useful knowledge" (rpt. Hearne 190). In this context, Beaumont emphasizes *Beauty's* love of music and books, creating a heroine who is a "reading woman," an important concept at a time when the general population was only just becoming a reading population and when literary heroines represented a new kind of female protagonist, one who thinks and learns.

With this more developed character as a prototype, Disney had much to build upon when its writers and animators set out to create their version of *Beauty*, who they hoped would be a thoroughly modern heroine, one who is interested in adventure and education. The screenwriter, Linda Woolverton, explains that

it's very difficult to take the originals and convert them into a story that works for the Nineties. . . . You have to consider what kids are like now in terms of sophistication, you have to make sure that your themes are strong, that people can relate to the characters, that the story isn't sexist. (qtd. in Thomas 143)

To a certain extent, it can be argued that Belle is a Nineties heroine. But *Beauty and the Beast* is essentially a love story, and in many ways it is not even Belle's love story as much as it is the Beast's. We can schematize it as "Beast gets girl, Beast loses girl, Beast gets girl back." In fact, as producer Don Hahn recalls, the late Howard Ashman, lyricist and executive producer of the film,

understood this focus intuitively: "It was Ashman who realized, contrary to tradition, that this had to be Beast's story. We didn't agree with him right away. But he was right. The Beast was the guy with the problem" (qtd. in Ansen 80).

Sylvia Bryant, writing about Jean Cocteau's film version of *Beauty and the Beast*, employs Teresa De Lauretis's reading of Western literature as always influenced by the oedipal myth to make a similar point from a more theoretical perspective:

Under the rubric of the Oedipal myth, woman's story is/can be only man's story—which is, after all, the same old story. In other words, no story. De Lauretis explains that this woman's dilemma as Other in Oedipal narrative [is] in, appropriately enough, a fairy tale frame of reference: "The end of the girl's journey, if successful, will bring her to the place where the boy will find her. . . . [T]he itinerary of the female's journey . . . [like] her story, like any other story, is a question of his desire." (441)

In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle functions as a plot device even more than do heroines in many other fairy tales; she is necessary to the Beast not just for romance, but to undo the spell he is under. This point becomes obvious when Belle first enters the palace. As she tiptoes down the dark hallways, the enchanted household objects are thrilled because she is "a girl, a girl!" While her father's entry the previous night merely aroused curiosity, Belle's appearance means much more because, as Lumiere the candlestick puts it, "She's the one, the girl we've been waiting for! She's the one to break the spell!" This emphasis on how Belle helps the Beast differs from the Beaumont version, in which the Beast's metamorphosis is only one aspect of a multifaceted story, and Beauty's character development is at issue as much as the Beast's. In the Disney version, it is Belle's utility as female that most attracts the castle's inhabitants, and her beauty is a close second. Belle's desires, her interest in exploration and education, have no meaning except in terms of how they can be manipulated into a romance to benefit the Beast and the bewitched servants.

The squelching of Belle's quest in service of the romance plot demonstrates Rachel Blau DuPlessis's primary criticism of that genre.

As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest . . . [and] incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success. The romance plot separates love and quest, values sexual asymmetry, including the division of labor by gender, is based on extremes of sexual difference, and evokes an aura around the couple itself. In short, the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. (5)

Necessarily inherent in this sex-gender system is the tendency to denigrate the female side of the relationship. In *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*, the feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin critiques the gender polarity our culture insists upon because it creates a

fundamental imbalance wherein one pole dominates another; the male sex is subject while the female is object. Assigning the values of narcissism and primitiveness to the maternal role, and the values of individuation and civilization to the paternal role, Freudian psychology implicitly privileges the father and denigrates the mother: the paternal values are those the oedipal child must achieve, and the maternal are those he or she must repudiate (140-41). Inevitably, the splitting of the father and the mother leads to the subjugation of the female and the dominance of the male.³

Beauty and the Beast, with its emphasis on a love relationship and its glorification of couples, is deeply imbued with the romance plot and the gender splitting that such a plot encourages. But that Disney's production of the story, like Beaumont's version, begins with a focus on Belle's intellectual and inquisitive nature at first suggests that the film will depart from the old narrative clichés. Throughout much of the movie's opening musical number, "Belle," Belle is reading and continues to do so while she expresses her desire to travel and learn about "something more than this provincial life." Education and travel have been categorized by Jerome Buckley as necessary steps in the male Bildungsroman:

A child of some sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. . . . His first schooling, even if not totally inadequate, may be frustrating insofar as it may suggest options not available to him in his present setting. He therefore, sometimes at a quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city. (17-18)

During "Belle," it appears that Belle's story will also be one of growth, of a girl's maturation into womanhood. It is clear that Belle does not fit into her town; she is seen as "odd," "strange," and "peculiar" because she has "a dreamy far-off look / and her nose stuck in a book." Reading is the symbol of this difference. As Gaston, the brutish man who covets Belle, so eloquently puts it, "It's not right for a woman to read—soon she starts getting ideas . . . and thinking." Indicating her intelligence and superiority, Belle's reading is also the activity that critics seized upon to point out her difference from former Disney heroines. *People* claimed, "Belle . . . is different because she's a feisty heroine who reads books" ("Going Under Cover"). Belle is repeatedly referred to as a "bookworm," a "booklover," and "studious." And Woolverton culminates a description of Belle's character with "She's a Disney heroine who reads books. It excites me. We've never seen that before" (qtd. in Thomas 143).

These discussions of Belle's reading, however, overlook what Belle actually chooses to read. Beaumont, by contrast, makes clear what sort of reading her female students do. Describing their analytic and interpretative powers, Beaumont insists that her students are intelligent and educated because they are well read: "Now-a-days ladies read all sorts of books, history, politicks, philosophy and even such as concern religion. They should therefore be in a condition to judge solidly of what they read and able to discern truth from falsehood" (qtd. in Hearne

17). Presumably, these are the sorts of books Beaumont's storyteller refers to when she points out that Beauty reads "good books," unlike her sisters, who spend their time pursuing frivolous activities such as attending "parties of pleasure" (rpt. Hearne 193). No such comparison is made in the Disney version. And although Belle claims that she likes to learn about "far off places, daring sword fights, magic spells," this catalogue of intriguing plotlines ends with "a prince in disguise." The last item increases in importance when Belle sits down to read and sings,

Isn't it amazing?
It's my favorite part because you see,
here's where she meets Prince Charming,
but she won't discover that it's him till Chapter Three.

At this point, we can see a picture in her book that depicts a young man and woman together. While it can be argued that this look into Belle's book anticipates Belle's own story, it also emphasizes the depth to which the structure of the romance plot penetrates the movie. The trait that makes Belle different, more intelligent, and more "liberated" than previous Disney heroines is that she likes to read books about Disney heroines. The book she holds reminds viewers of this fact with subtle and insidious pressure.

Throughout the movie, the writers advance the metaphor of reading. Gaston's callousness and stupidity are underscored when he throws Belle's book in the mud, later resting his filthy boots on it, and the most exciting part of the Beast's castle is its large, well-stocked library. In fact, this library helps the Beast woo Beauty; when he is trying to win her over, Cogsworth, Lumiere, and Mrs. Potts, the enchanted household objects, urge him to present her with the library. As wonderful as it is that literacy finds encouragement in a Disney movie (a point underscored by the American Library Association posters featuring a picture of Belle and the Beast in the latter's library), the intent of its inclusion may extend beyond the desire to paint Belle as an intellectual. Maslin observes that Belle

is the first conspicuously well-read Disney heroine. . . . Naturally, Disney is playing to parents' appreciation of literacy. But no doubt, this also has something to do with Disney's recent publishing ventures, since the company has shown amazing ability to spot opportunities for commercial "cross-pollination."⁴ (16)

Maslin's point and my contention that Belle's propensity for reading ultimately has little weight in her development as an intelligent woman find validity in the fact that Belle is only once shown reading, for a very little time (exactly fourteen seconds) after she is given the library. We do not know what she is reading or what she thinks about it. In fact, as the parallel commentary of the household objects confirms, this scene emphasizes Belle and the Beast reading together and thus developing their relationship more than it conveys the idea that Belle is reading to increase her knowledge or pleasure. Here is a crucial indication that Belle's quest for adventure and education will be swallowed by the romance plot.

Buckley connects education and the desire to travel; Belle's

reading inspires her to leave her "provincial life" and seek adventure. When she finally gets that chance, however, Belle's motivations change. As we have seen, DuPlessis explains that in the typical romance plot, quest succumbs to love, and Belle's case is no exception. When Belle sets off to find her father, Maurice, it seems her quest to explore "the great wide somewhere" beyond her small town might be fulfilled. To her credit, Belle is adventurous and brave, as her determination to find her father and her proposal that she take his place as a prisoner both demonstrate. Yet in these actions, Belle's desire for adventure gets lost first in her need to take care of her father and second in her growing affection for the Beast. Earlier, when Maurice rode off on their horse, Philippe, the viewer saw several seconds of travel time and a few "shots" showing the changing location and the day gradually turning into night, indicating that Maurice was covering some distance. When Belle jumps on the horse, the action cuts immediately to the castle, with Belle sitting on Philippe right in front of the gates. Any sense of journey, of the travel and exploration Belle had yearned for, has been eradicated. Indeed, as the movie progresses, the castle seems to move closer and closer to Belle's village. Belle's desire to see far-off lands and travel is visually as well as narratively squelched.⁵

In spite of Belle's aspirations to educate herself, the film locates her real value in her capacity to nurture. The only human female in the movie with more than two speaking lines, Belle must take on the responsibility of caring for her father (to the point of self-sacrifice) and ministering to the Beast's physical and emotional wounds.⁶ Belle's concern for her father finds precedent in earlier versions of the fairy tale. In these versions, Belle's father is a merchant who has lost all of his money in a commercial venture. Disney's Maurice, presented as a lovable, bumbling, absent-minded inventor, appears never to have had much money and needs Beauty's support and encouragement from the first moments that we see them together. When his Rube Goldberg invention fails, Beauty soothingly persuades him to try again, which he does. She acts as both mother and daughter to him. In fact, Belle's concern for her father provides two crucial plot developments. The first is Gaston's attempt to have Maurice confined to an asylum; he is certain that Belle will consent to marry him in order to have her father released. Since we have already seen Belle suggest such self-sacrifice in the Beast's dungeon, we know that Gaston's assumption is correct.⁷ Later, after the Beast and Belle have begun to fall in love, the Beast releases her when he realizes how deeply she is concerned about Maurice. Belle's care for her father, not herself, is what motivates much of her action in the story. While such commitment is commendable, it is typically insulated, drawing a female protagonist back into the family circle and denying her the chance to act for her own sake.⁸

Belle's nurturing tendencies are also instrumental as she grows fond of the Beast. While cleansing his wounds after wolves attack him, Belle first develops positive feelings for him. Most significantly, not only the Beast's security but also the plot of the story itself hinge on his obtaining Belle's love. In order for the spell to be broken and for the tale to reach its slated conclusion, the Beast must cause Belle to love him. Similarly, the Gaston subplot pivots on the quest for Belle's affection. In both plots, however, Belle is the object of desire, not the active subject. When the action of the film shifts to the castle, the point

of view similarly shifts to the Beast (where it had actually originated, in the prologue). Finally, near the end of the movie, the Beast lies dying and Belle cries over his prostrate body. While some critics have suggested a feminist impulse in this reversal of the customary set piece of a prince kissing the body of a sleeping or wounded girl, the image seems more suggestive of the *Pietà*—the mother holding her dying son. In fact, the Disney book version uses the word “cradling” (90).

Belle’s entrenched maternity promotes the gender polarization to which Benjamin objects. Indeed, “Beauty and the Beast,” more so perhaps than many other fairy tales, encourages gender polarity to the point of celebration. Whereas other heroines fall in love with princes, Beauty must learn to love a man who is grotesquely animalistic. Many of the characteristics that make the Beast ugly are exaggerations of normal male traits: his size, his hairiness, his gruffness, and his strength. Representing the “sexual asymmetry” and “extremes of sexual difference” typical of the romance plot, the Beast pushes these differences to their limits. They are even more evident in comparison to the relatively tiny and delicate Belle, a contrast that the film insistently provides and that it sometimes exaggerates even further with the use of shadows and lighting.⁹ Furthermore, Disney’s Beast has an angry, violent streak that is not present in Beaumont’s version. Her Beast is cordial, gentle and refined; as Beauty puts it, he has “virtue, sweetness of temper, and complaisance” (202). Disney’s Beast, on the other hand, is characterized by a terrible temper, manifested through physical power, which causes him to tear apart his private chambers and frightens the castle’s inhabitants. The film’s insistence on sexual difference, magnified when the Beast becomes the focus of the movie, will take its toll on Belle. Her traditionally unfeminine traits lose importance as the film progresses. While Belle initially appears spunky, independent, and curious, her surrender to the seduction of sexual difference, like the plot’s surrender to romantic closure, denies her that independence and forces her into subjugation.

That the Disney writers portray the Beast as an ignorant monster instead of as an intelligent being also substantially changes the meaning of Beauty’s acceptance of him. When Beauty returns to her family and misses the Beast, she realizes that she loves him for the qualities that made him a pleasing companion, despite his unattractiveness; Beauty has learned a lesson and grown as a result, just as the Beast, too, has changed and matured. Beaumont makes clear that this growth occurs as a result of nightly, shared dinners that receive significant narrative attention in her version. In the Disney film, this period of mutual education is collapsed into a few moments of screen time, described in the book version as a period during which the Beast learns and Belle teaches. Note the language in the following passage:

Over the next few days, things began to change between Belle and the Beast. They were becoming friends! Belle learned a lot from the Beast, too. He didn’t know how to eat with a knife and a fork, so she taught him. He didn’t know how to read, so she read to him. She taught him how to feed birds and how to play in the snow. (Singer 69)

Despite the declaration that “Belle learned,” it is clear here who evolves and who stays essentially the same. Disney consciously discarded the dinner scenes, diminishing the reciprocity and mutual growth on which Beauty and the Beast’s relationship rests.

Belle does seem to learn one lesson in the Disney movie: one should not form opinions of others based on how they look. Here, Disney does not modify Beaumont’s version at all. Although I respect the lesson that both Disney and Beaumont illustrate, I must point out the danger lurking beneath it when viewed from the perspective of the latent sexism in the tale. It is Belle and not the Beast who must learn to love ugliness and literally embrace the bestial. The inclusion of Gaston in Disney’s version does hint that handsome men are not necessarily good men, but again, that lesson is directed toward female viewers. Disney movies make no great strides in teaching boys that girls need not be beautiful in order to be desirable or interesting.

In addition to the changes in Belle’s and the Beast’s characters, Disney alters the secondary characters as well, eliminating some and creating others, increasing the romantic aspects of the story at the expense of the didactic messages and moral development of the heroine. Disney excludes Belle’s two sisters and the “fine lady” who visits the heroine’s dreams, adds Gaston, and modifies the father’s personality substantially. In Beaumont’s version, the sisters are not only grubby and stupid but also self-centered. Moreover, they are deceitful, conspiring to trick Beauty into breaking her promise to the Beast even as they secretly hope that he will kill her in his rage. By omitting the sisters, the Disney version de-emphasizes most of the earlier version’s concern with virtue, further intensifying the focus on the “romantic angle.”

Another female character, the “fine lady” of Beauty’s dreams who appears in Beaumont and most of the tales that Hearne examines (128-29), is absent in Disney’s version. Counseling and soothing Beauty, this fairy godmother guides Beauty to make “judicious” choices and is “crucial” to the plot (203, 128). Although I have taken issue with her primary purpose, which is to teach Beauty to look beyond appearances, I view her absence as detrimental because it deprives Belle of connection to a female character who has Belle’s interests uppermost in her mind. Unlike Mrs. Potts and the Wardrobe, the missing fairy godmother is a stand-in for Beaumont herself; both women counsel and teach young female readers. Hearne points out that of the versions she has studied, only those written by “Lamb, Crane and Cocteau (all male!) feature no fairy godmother figures” (129). Stronger than Cinderella’s fairy godmother because she is concerned with Beauty’s ethical and mental development, this fine lady could have incorporated an important example of female bonding and support in the Disney film.

The omission of the sisters and the fine lady is linked to the change in character of the father in that both deletions weaken the significance of the story. By simplifying and infantilizing the father’s character, Disney dilutes the dramatic tension in the story. For example, in Beaumont and virtually all subsequent versions, the father returns to his family and brings Beauty back with him to the castle according to the Beast’s demands, but in the Disney version, Maurice is absolved of all responsibility when the Beast locks him up and later throws him bodily out of the castle. The reduction of complexity in this area again

redirects our attention to the romance.

Adding Gaston forces the issue of romance even further. Except for Avenant in Cocteau's film, there seems no precedent for the large role of Gaston in any other version of "Beauty and the Beast." In addition to the violence and brutality that Gaston's character creates, his inclusion sets up a love triangle. He is, in effect, the other man. That Belle has no interest in Gaston does not diminish the romantic elements that he introduces. He is considered by the townspeople (most of all himself) as a "catch"; he arrives at Belle's house to propose marriage; he conspires to have Maurice committed to an asylum so Belle will marry him, and with the same intent he incites the villagers to kill the Beast. While it may be argued that his character retains some of the negative traits that Beauty's sisters represented in Beaumont's version, including crass superficiality and stupidity, his role as lover supersedes the potential that those characteristics have for moral edification.

Furthermore, Gaston's presence reinforces a violent, angry element, also seen in the Beast, that is in itself objectionable. That Gaston's brutal and often sadistic actions are provoked by desire for a woman invidiously links sex and violence in a culture that far too often suffers the ramifications of that union. More than the obvious violence shown when Gaston stalks and then attempts to kill the Beast, subtle sexual violence is also implied with his character. When he visits Belle to propose to her, Belle continually shrinks from him as he towers over her and muscles his way around her home. Pinning her against the wall and sending a chair flying, Gaston threatens Belle with bodily harm while he demands that she marry him.

Such imagery is common in Disney films. Michael Eisner, the chairman of Disney, has made it clear that he has no problem with the depiction of violence. When asked what he thought of movie studios that routinely make violent films, he answered, "It's not a moral issue. I'm glad they do." His opinion of whether or not there is a distinction between cartoon and real violence is similar: "I don't know the answer to that. I don't want to sit in judgment. I don't think about it that much" (qtd. in Auletta 48). He accuses those who are concerned with hypocrisy, charging that "[they] get on a platform and berate Hollywood for violence in the movies, on the one hand, and ignore the proliferation of handguns—something they could do something about—on another." Eisner's attempt to relieve studios of any moral responsibility is stunning.

If Disney claims to be updating fairy tales for contemporary children by eliminating sexism and creating strong female characters, then Disney is subject to an examination of these aspirations. To be sure, it is important to remember that Belle is an improvement on earlier Disney heroines. She is presented as a much more well-rounded person, with interests, goals, and aspirations. More than just a self-sacrificing, devoted daughter, Belle shows gumption when she stands up to the Beast, curiosity when she explores the forbidden West Wing, and rebellion when she runs away from the castle.¹⁰ But these traits, in and of themselves, are not rewarded or acknowledged as the tale closes. The emphasis is on Belle's nurturing tenderness, her beauty, her sexuality, and her happily-ever-after commitment to the Beast. Each of the refreshing traits set up at the beginning of the story is diminished or eliminated. The importance of Belle as a reader is greatly reduced. We do not see her travel beyond her

village and the neighboring palace. We do not know whether she develops any new interests or ideas. Instead, we find her in virtually the same position as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella at the end of their stories: by the side of her prince. The capitulation of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* to the romance plot is complete. Because it aspired to move beyond this conclusion and snared us into thinking that it might, the Disney version is ultimately more dangerous than the most blatantly sexist fairy tales. Recognizing this danger is the first step in transforming that beast.

NOTES

I am indebted to Mitzi Myers, the "fine lady" of this paper, and to J.D.L.

¹Throughout this paper, I use "Disney" when I refer to the Walt Disney Production Company. Its use is not intended to slight the memory of Walt Disney, the man.

²If a film has a male main character, romance recedes in importance. For example, it is only a subplot in *The Lion King*.

³For a deeper analysis of Benjamin's ideas in the context of fairy tales, see Zipes.

⁴Stephen Kline demonstrates that Disney created this children's market as far back as the 1930s with *Snow White*: "The feature-length *Snow White* did not only prove successful among the critics and at the box office. It also showed the great merchandising potential of animated characters. . . . the immediate impact of *Snow White* on Disney Licensing was remarkable. . . . *Snow White* was the first indication of what would eventually become a multibillion dollar revenue for the Disney empire constructed around the copywriting [sic] of images" (118). Kline supports my belief that Disney is not a benign reflector of "what kids want." On the contrary, films such as *Beauty and the Beast* are deeply invested in shaping what children want for the primary goal of making money. If *Snow White* did so well in the '30s, Disney has little to gain by wandering far from that formula in the '90s, despite the significant and entrenched changes in attitudes toward women that transpired in the decades between. As Kline explains, "Business interests trying to maximize profits cannot be expected to worry about cultural values or social objectives beyond the consumerist cultural vector that underwrites commercial media" (350).

⁵The concept of the journey is so intrinsic to "Beauty and the Beast" that Hearne characterizes it as one of the "enduring elements" of the tale in all its variants and claims that journey "is the framework of the story. . . . The outer journeys serve as vehicles for the inner journeys" (129-30). But Disney sees journey as important only in terms of the goal of finding a man. In the film, Belle tells her father, "It's just that I'm not sure if I fit in here. There's no one I can really talk to." And her father then suggests Gaston. The "Classic Illustrated" book, a Disney Press publication, makes the point even more obvious: "Belle knew that [her father] would prove himself to the world someday. And when he did, maybe he would take her somewhere glamorous and exciting where she could meet her own Prince Charming" (12).

⁶The other prominent female presence is Mrs. Potts, the teapot. Indubitably female, Mrs. Potts is also a nurturing mother to Chip, the teacup, and to all the rest of the castle's inhabitants, including the Beast and Belle. Likewise, Belle's armoire is maternally helpful. The feather duster, so obviously a version of the seductive French maid, is in the same mode as the three blonde "bimbettes" in the village who stupidly pine after Gaston. In effect, then, all the female characters in the film can be characterized as madonnas or whores, except for Belle, who is the sweet ingenue on her way to becoming a mother herself.

⁷Belle's sacrifice here has precedents in the earlier versions of the story. Because her father is a much stronger and more self-determined character in these versions, however, Beauty is not depicted in such a maternal role.

⁸Maria Tatar notes that Bruno Bettelheim's reading of "Beauty and the Beast" further promotes that family circle. "[Bettelheim] finds that Beauty . . . provides [her father] with 'a happy life in proximity to his beloved daughter.' Beauty's devotion to her husband and her father becomes the happy ending both to her own story and to Bettelheim's meditation on fairy tales" (xxv).

⁹While any version of "Beauty and the Beast" will necessarily portray the Beast as unattractive, it is possible to do so while simultaneously pointing to similarities between the two main characters in addition to their differences. In the Marianna Mayer and Mercer Mayer version of the story, the illustrations make this subtle comparison. For example, the Beast and Beauty share similar physical characteristics, such as long, straight, flowing brown hair.

¹⁰For a discussion of the heroine's curiosity in "Cupid and Psyche," a precursor to "Beauty and the Beast," see Tatar 148-49.

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